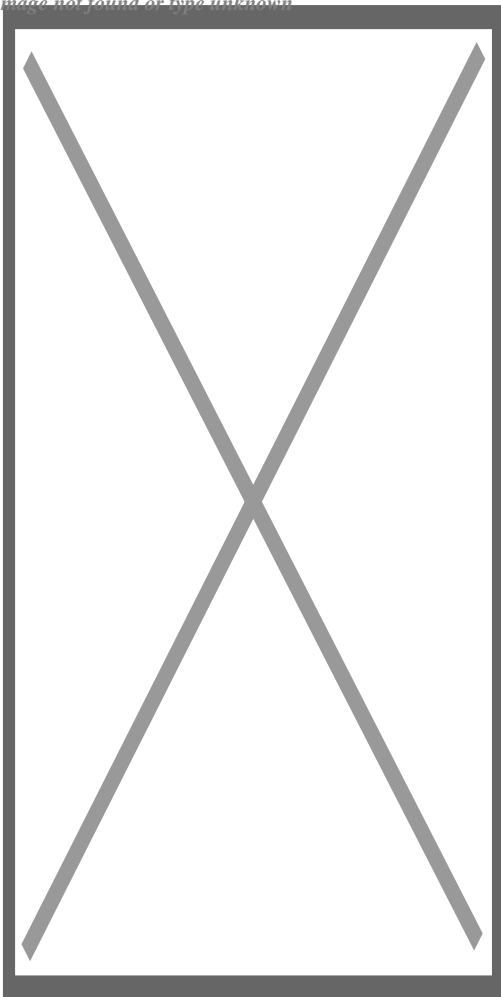


Israel to restrict access to Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan

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Tel Aviv, February 21 (RHC)-- Israel will impose some restrictions on access to Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of occupied East Jerusalem during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan according to "security needs", Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office says.

The Al-Aqsa compound, the third holiest site in the world for Muslims, sits atop a hill in the Old City. The site is also revered by Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount.

Restrictions on access to the site have long caused friction, particularly around religious holidays such as Ramadan, which will begin about March 10 this year. Asked about the possibility of blocking access for some worshippers during the holy month, Netanyahu's office said on Monday: "The prime minister made a balanced decision within the security needs determined by professionals." His office gave no further details.

Hamas, the Palestinian group that governs the Gaza Strip, denounced the planned restrictions and urged Palestinians to mobilise against them. It described the restrictions as "a continuation of Zionist criminality and religious warfare led by the extremist settlers group in the terrorist occupation government against our Palestinian people."

The group called on Palestinians in Israel, Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank to "reject this criminal decision, resist the occupation's arrogance and insolence, and mobilise to stand firm and steadfast in Al-Aqsa Mosque." Israel often sets rules to limit the number of worshippers at the site, citing security reasons. Israeli forces have previously undertaken violent raids at the site during Ramadan.

The announcement comes as Israel warns that it will continue its assault on Gaza during Ramadan, including in the densely populated Rafah area in the south.

"The world must know and Hamas leaders must know: If by Ramadan the hostages are not home, the fighting will continue everywhere to include the Rafah area," war cabinet member Benny Gantz said on Sunday. "We will do so in a coordinated manner, facilitating the evacuation of civilians in dialogue with American and Egyptian partners and to minimise the civilian casualties as much as possible."

"Hamas has a choice. They can surrender, release the hostages and the civilians of Gaza can celebrate the feast of Ramadan," he said. Israel launched its assault on Gaza on October 7 after Hamas led attacks on Israel, killing at least 1,139 people, according to an Al Jazeera count based on official figures. It also took about 250 other people captive.

Israel's bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza has killed more than 29,000 people, according to Palestinian authorities. It has also reduced much of Gaza to rubble and displaced more than 80 percent of its population, according to aid groups.

Negotiations over a potential truce and hostage-for-prisoner exchange have appeared to stall in recent weeks with Netanyahu publicly describing demands by Hamas as "delusional".

The United States, Israel's top ally, has said it still hopes to broker a pause in hostilities but signalled it would veto a draft United Nations resolution calling for a ceasefire and argued against measures that could jeopardise "the opportunity for an enduring resolution of hostilities".

There is growing international pressure on Israel to halt the war in the enclave, especially as UN agencies warn of catastrophic damage and casualties if Israeli forces press on towards Rafah. Still, Netanyahu has insisted on his war goals of "destroying" Hamas.

On Sunday, the Israeli leader promised "total victory" over Hamas despite rising anger from desperate relatives of the remaining captives and growing antigovernment protests.



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