

Muslim worshippers clash with Israeli police at Jerusalem holy site

Muslims refer to the site as the Noble Sanctuary and Jews refer to it as the Temple Mount.

JERUSALEM — Muslim worshipers clashed with Israeli police in Jerusalem's Old City Sunday, a holy day on the religious calendar for both the Jewish and Islamic faiths.

Israeli authorities said that tens of thousands flooded the holy site to participate in prayers marking the beginning of Eid al-Adha, with clashes breaking out after protesters began crowding around the only gate where non-Muslims can enter the compound.

Police said Muslim worshippers started throwing stones and chairs at officers who were guarding the entrance to the site, which Muslims refer to as the Noble Sanctuary and Jews refer to as the Temple Mount.

Police fired tear gas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets in response.

Some 37 Muslims were injured in the clashes, according to the Red Crescent. Israeli authorities said four officers were lightly injured in the skirmishes.



Palestinian Muslims shout anti-occupation slogans as they protest against the entry of Jewish worshippers into the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem on Sunday. AHMAD GHARABLI / AFP - Getty Images

Rumours had swirled that some Jewish visitors would be allowed to enter to mark the day of mourning for the destruction of the two Jewish temples that stood there in antiquity.

Israeli authorities can decide to bar entry to Jewish visitors on Muslim holidays if they feel it will stoke tensions. Police had initially prohibited them from entering the complex but later reversed the decision after the clashes broke out.

Jewish visitors streamed through the gate under close police escort, triggering further skirmishes, according to a guard at the compound who spoke to NBC News. The Jewish visitors left the compound shortly after, according to the Associated Press.

Hanan Ashrawi, a veteran Palestinian politician, accused Israel of provoking religious and political tension.

“The storming of al-Aqsa mosque compound by Israeli occupation forces this Eid morning is an act of recklessness and aggression,” she said in a statement.

The contested complex in central Jerusalem is the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest for Islam after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

For Muslims, the 37-acre esplanade is home to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Islamic Dome of the Rock shrine. For Jews, its status as their religion’s holiest site is tied to its history as the site of First and Second Temples.

Conflicts over the area have triggered confrontations for centuries.

Nowadays Israel provides security for the compound while neighboring Jordan manages the ceremonial and religious aspects of the complex.

Jordan issued a statement condemning what it described as “blatant Israeli violations” against Al-Aqsa mosque and said it had sent a formal complaint to Israel.

“The Israeli government bears full responsibility for the resulting violence and high tension,” said Sufian al-Qudah, a spokesman for the Jordanian Foreign Ministry.

Jewish visitors are not permitted to pray at the site under a longstanding arrangement between Israel and Muslim authorities. Jewish tradition also maintains that Jews should not enter the site and Jews pray instead outside at the Western or Wailing Wall.

In recent years, however, Israeli religious nationalists have encouraged Jews to pray inside the site, challenging the delicate status quo.

Palestinians view this as a provocation and are concerned that Jews mean to seize control or partition the complex. The Israeli government has repeatedly said it has no intention of changing the current arrangement.

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