



## AL-AQSA MOSQUE: A PALESTINIAN PERSPECTIVE

### GENERAL BACKGROUND

Al-Aqsa Mosque/Al-Haram Ash-Sharif holds immense religious, historical and cultural significance for Muslims worldwide. For Palestinians, it also has symbolic significance which highlights the interplay between religion, politics, and territorial control. In recent year, it has increasingly become a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with frequent tension and clashes as it faces unprecedented threats by Israeli attempts aimed at altering its status and control, and even allowing non-Muslim prayer there.

To avoid further violence and escalation, Israeli violations must be addressed and the protection of this holy site ensured, with adherence to international law and an international commitment to upholding the rights and freedoms of Palestinians.

### ISRAELI VIOLATIONS AT AL-AQSA MOSQUE

#### ● Restricted Access and Freedom of Worship:

- Israeli authorities frequently impose age and residency-based restrictions on Palestinian worshippers, particularly during significant Islamic events like Ramadan, or Jewish holidays.
- On many occasions, checkpoints and police deployment in and around the Old City of Jerusalem hinder Palestinians from accessing Al-Aqsa, violating their freedom of worship. After October 7, 2023, Palestinians were completely banned from entering Al-Aqsa Mosque, with the exception of residents of the Old City. That situation was not relaxed until the beginning of Ramadan, five months later. On Eid Al-Adha in June 2024, Israeli police, border police and special forces beat youth entering to make Eid prayers at the mosque with batons.
- At the same time, groups of Jewish extremists (settlers) escorted by Israeli police enter the Al-Aqsa compound and provocatively tour the site, often – illegally – attempting to pray or actually doing so, leading to tensions and confrontations with Palestinian worshippers.



● Police Presence and Military Operations:

- Israeli police presence on the compound itself – including security checks, surveillance cameras, metal detectors – is intimidating and a huge provocation. Police’s excessive use of force against Palestinian worshippers, including tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades, even inside the mosque itself, and arbitrary arrests of Palestinians have been well-documented.
- During Israeli raids, there have been many instances of vandalism and damage to the mosque.



● Jewish Rightwing Organizations

- So-called “Temple Mount” organizations and groups as well as individual Jewish extremists, including government ministers and other officials, aggressively call for incursions into Al-Aqsa Mosque/Haram Al-Sharif to establish Israeli presence and prayer there. Although prohibited, they frequently perform Talmudic rituals, pray and wave the Israeli flag at the site – while the police look on without interfering. According to figures from the Islamic Waqf in Jerusalem, a total of 34,374 Jewish extremists had entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the first nine months of 2023 alone. This number does not include an additional 3,693 special forces, 21 archaeological staff, 4,804 Jewish students, 638 soldiers and intelligence, and 1,564 police guests. In the first three months of 2024, 7,984 Jewish extremists and 1,078 yeshiva students had already entered Al-Aqsa Mosque compound (excluding security people, soldiers, tourists, and antiquity authority staff).

**Jewish Extremists Entering Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound, 2008-2023**



Source: Islamic Waqf Department, Jerusalem.



- Some of them openly seek to demolish the mosque and build a Jewish temple in its place while others wish to divide the compound between Muslims and Jews as with Al-Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron. Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir has been very blunt on this: on 17 April 2024, he made it his ministerial policy to change the status quo at the Al-Aqsa Mosque/Haram Al-Sharif by apparently easing Jewish prayer and boosting police enforcement there<sup>1</sup>.



#### ● Excavations:

- Israeli excavations and construction near and beneath the Al-Aqsa compound have already caused damage and threaten the structural integrity of the mosque.

#### ● Political and Legal Maneuvering:

- Israeli laws and policies increasingly facilitate Jewish claims and presence at Al-Aqsa, undermining the internationally recognized *status quo*.
- These actions contravene various international laws and United Nations resolutions concerning the protection of holy sites and cultural heritage.

### RAMADAN 2024

There were fears that during Ramadan, the situation in Jerusalem and the West Bank could explode (due to the ongoing war in Gaza), especially if people were harassed and deprived of observing their holy month of Ramadan in peace. One of Israel's main concerns was keeping Al-Aqsa disconnected from Gaza, given the aspiration of the war being "Al Aqsa Flood". Messages indirectly passed to the Israeli authorities were that there must be no general suspicion and no proactive presumptions on how Palestinians would act. Instead, a positive approach should be adopted that put Ramadan's spiritual significance at the forefront, allowed Muslims to celebrate it without imposition of collective punishment, and let the Waqf deal with potentially emerging incitement or violence. The plan was that if this did not work, Israel could still intervene. At the end, Ramadan 2024 has shown again that Palestinian worshippers are not an infringement on Israeli security and access to holy sites must be guaranteed and not used as an instrument of "collective punishment". No Israeli forces on-site or in sight means no provocation to the Palestinians.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-reportedly-makes-it-a-ministry-policy-to-change-temple-mount-status-quo/>.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- International actors: establish an independent body to monitor, report and act on violations of international law that take place at Al-Aqsa Mosque, including collective punishment measures, protect Palestinian worshippers, and strengthen UNESCO's role to protect Palestinian cultural and religious heritage.
- Local actors: advocate for the maintenance of the historical and legal status quo, as well as for sanctions/diplomatic measures against individuals and entities involved in violations, including denial or restriction of access, assaults against worshippers, and damage.