

Israel's Ben-Gvir Storms Al-Aqsa in 'Unprecedented Provocation'

Palestinian Authority condemns minister's visit, which both the Israeli opposition and Hamas had warned could lead to dangerous escalation

By [Middle East Eye](#)

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Israel's far-right national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, entered [Al-Aqsa Mosque's](#) courtyards in occupied East Jerusalem on Tuesday, in a move bound to inflame tensions.

A [video posted on social media](#) shows Ben-Gvir touring the courtyards with a heavy security detail.

متابعة صفا | وزير الأمن القومي الإسرائيلي الجديد المتطرف إيتمار بن غفير يقتحم المسجد الأقصى لمدة ١٣ دقيقة برفقة عدد كبير من رجال الشرطة pic.twitter.com/fqWITDdK2f

— وكالة صفا (@SafaPs) [January 3, 2023](#)

On Monday, the Palestinian movement Hamas warned [Israel](#) that it “won't sit idly by” if the new security minister visits Al-Aqsa Mosque, as he [vowed to do](#) on Sunday.

Following his visit on Tuesday, Ben-Gvir said:

“Our government will not surrender to threats from Hamas.

“The Temple Mount is the most important place for the people of Israel,” he said, using the Jewish name for the site.

“We maintain the freedom of movement for Muslims and Christians, but Jews also go up to the site, and those who make threats must be dealt with an iron fist.”

Al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the holiest sites in Islam and the site of the Jewish temple

destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE.

Since Israel occupied the site following the 1967 Middle East war, Jewish prayer at the site has been forbidden, though far-right settlers such as Ben-Gvir (some of whom want to demolish Al-Aqsa and replace it with a third Jewish temple) have frequently prayed there under strict security in recent years.

The Palestinian Authority's foreign ministry, which is run by Hamas' rival Fatah, said in a [statement](#) that it holds Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "responsible for Ben-Gvir's storming of Al-Aqsa and its consequences".

It went on to add that it "strongly condemns the extremist minister Ben-Gvir's storming of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque and considers it an unprecedented provocation and a serious threat" to regional stability.

On Monday, Yair Lapid, who Netanyahu last week replaced as prime minister, slammed the planned visit, calling it a "[deliberate provocation](#)" that would result in people dying.

Lapid urged Netanyahu to restrain his new national security minister.

Initial reports in the Hebrew media indicated that Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir had agreed to postpone the visit. However, Netanyahu's Likud party denied that such a request had been made.

International reactions

The United Arab Emirates, which normalised relations with Israel in 2020, released a [statement condemning](#) the storming of Al-Aqsa.

"The UAE today strongly condemned the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque courtyard by an Israeli minister under the protection of Israeli forces," said the statement, avoiding naming Ben-Gvir.

The statement called on,

"Israeli authorities to assume responsibility for reducing escalation and instability in the region."

It continued:

"Moreover, the Ministry stressed the need to support all regional and international efforts to advance the Middle East Peace Process, end illegal practices that threaten the two-state solution, and establish an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital."

The [French embassy in Israel](#) called for the "preservation of the status quo of the Holy Places of Jerusalem. Any gesture aimed at questioning it carries a risk of escalation and must be avoided."

Changing the status quo

Hamas spokesman Abd al-Latif al-Qanua said on Monday that the planned visit was "another

example of the arrogance of the settler government and their future plans to damage and divide Al-Aqsa Mosque”.

“The Palestinian resistance will not allow the neo-fascist occupation government to cross the red lines and encroach on our people and our sanctities.”

Netanyahu’s sixth government, the most right-wing administration in Israel’s history, has said that its main guiding policy will be that “the Jewish people have an exclusive and indisputable right to all areas of the Land of Israel”, referring to the concept of “Greater Israel” that includes the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and other foreign lands.

This is not the first time that Ben-Gvir has stormed Al-Aqsa. In May last year, accompanied by his wife and son, Ben-Gvir posted a picture calling for the destruction of the site to “[establish a synagogue on the mountain](#)”.

When former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon made a similar trip to the site in 2000, it sparked the Second Intifada Palestinian uprising.

According to [data compiled by Middle East Eye](#), Israeli forces killed more Palestinians in the [occupied](#) West Bank in 2022 than in a single calendar year since the [Second Intifada](#).

At least 220 people have died in Israeli attacks across the occupied territories, including 48 children. Of the total death toll, 167 were from the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and 53 were from the Gaza Strip.

An additional five Palestinian citizens of Israel have been killed in the same period. Meanwhile, Palestinians have killed at least 29 Israelis, including one child, the highest death toll since 2008.

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Featured image: Israel’s National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir visits Al-Aqsa, 3 January (Social Media)

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