

# Tensions run high in Jerusalem as mosques and Muslims targeted

Sun, 2020-01-26 00:22

AMMAN: Tensions are running high in Jerusalem following an arson attack on a mosque, anti-Palestinian graffiti and a leading cleric given an extended ban from Al-Aqsa, senior figures have told Arab News.

Arson was suspected in the torching of a mosque in Beit Safafa and graffiti had been sprayed on a nearby wall outside the building.

The events follow the high-security commemoration of Holocaust memorial events that were attended by dignitaries and heads of state from around the world in Jerusalem.

Muslim leaders called on worshippers to attending sunrise morning prayers on Friday and at least 50,000 people turned up, causing Israeli authorities to panic.

Worshippers carried Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, who had already been told to stay away from Al-Aqsa, on their shoulders and the picture of the defiant congregation bearing him aloft was published around the world.

Wasfi Kailani, executive director of the Hashemite Fund, said the escalation of the situation has caused people to worry.

"Muslims are worried about their mosque and their action reflects their loss of trust in all the attempts to quieten them down," he told Arab News.

Sabri told Arab News he had not received any written ban to stop him entering the mosque when he entered it on Friday.

The following day Israeli soldiers appeared at his house at 2 a.m. and handed him a four-month ban from entering Al-Aqsa. The sheikh said the decision was "revenge for a picture that went around the world."

He said he would meet his lawyers and fellow Muslim leaders to decide what would happen next.

Fadi Hidmi, the Palestinian minister of Jerusalem affairs, told Arab News that Israelis had shown they did not respect holy places or faith leaders. The people of East Jerusalem were united and resilient, he added.

**Muslims are worried about their mosque and their action reflects their loss of trust in all the attempts to quieten them down.**

**Wasfi Kailani, Hashemite Fund official**

Israeli officials were upset with the visit to Al-Aqsa by French President Emmanuel Macron, which was not officially coordinated with any political side. The visit was preceded by a confrontation between Macron and Israeli police who tried to stop him from visiting the Church of St. Anne and his meeting there with Palestinian Christian leaders.

Macron visited Al-Aqsa, giving just 45-minutes notice to the head of the Islamic Waqf in Jerusalem Sheikh Azzam Khatib. But there was no official coordination with Israel, Palestine or Jordan.

Macron was well received at the holy site, and later met local merchants in

the old city. He also visited the Western Wall.

Ziad Abu Zayyad, former minister of Jerusalem affairs in the Palestinian government, told Arab News that the attack on Jerusalem's mosques and leaders had become the norm and that Israel's anti-Palestinian attitude had become evident to the world.

Mahdi Abdul Hadi, director of the PASSIA think tank in Jerusalem and a member of the Islamic Waqf, told Arab News that after 52 years of occupation, the people of Jerusalem had proved that their unity and sense of community was the strongest asset for Palestinians in the holy city.



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## [Houthi military leaders die in clashes near Sanaa](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-01-26 00:30

AL-MUKALLA, YEMEN: Iranian-backed Houthi militias have announced the deaths of two military leaders killed in fierce fighting with government forces near the rebel-held city of Sanaa.

Brig. Osam Abdul Hadi and Yahyia Ahmad Al-Saraji died in clashes after government forces launched offensives to cut militia supply lines outside Sana'a and in Hodeida, Jawf and Serwah.

Hospitals in Sanaa, Hajja and Dhamar are struggling to deal with the rising number of wounded following the intense fighting.

On Saturday, fighting broke out in the mountainous Nehim district as army troops advanced into Houthi-controlled territory.

Yemen's Defense Minister, Lt. Gen. Mohammed Ali Al-Maqdashi, said earlier that army troops had withdrawn from locations in Nehim to regroup before resuming their efforts to expel Houthis from Sanaa.

Fighting intensified early last week after Houthi missile and drone attacks killed more than 110 soldiers and civilians in Marib. Saudi-led coalition aircraft also targeted Houthi establishments and reinforcements traveling from Sana'a to Nehim.

## **NUMBER**

**232 – civilians, including 68 children and 29 women, were killed by Houthi artillery fire and land mines in Hodeida since late 2018, according to pro-government media outlets.**

Meanwhile, government forces fought off a Houthi attack in the Red Sea city of Hodeida on Friday night. At least 10 rebels, including Abu Mohammed Al-Lahji, a senior Houthi spokesman, died in the fighting.

According to Yemen's Foreign Affairs Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami, Houthi militias had taken advantage of a suspension of hostilities to reinforce their fighters.

Al-Hadrami warned that Houthi shelling and incursions in Hodeida could derail peace efforts, currently being led by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths. Yemenis would not "tolerate" more violations by the militia, the minister added.

Earlier this month, pro-government media outlets said that 232 civilians, including 68 children and 29 women, had been killed by Houthi artillery fire and land mines in Hodeida since late 2018.



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## [Turkey's Halkbank facing fines for avoiding US sanctions case](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-01-26 00:27

JEDDAH: Turkey's state-owned Halkbank has failed to defend itself in court in New York amid charges related to Iranian sanctions.

The non-appearances have increased the penalties the bank could pay for violating US sanctions against Iran between 2012 to 2016.

The suggested fine is \$1 million for each day of absence during the first week of noncompliance, increasing to \$2 million per day in the following week, with fines reaching \$105 million after a month and \$1.8 billion after two months.

Halkbank – one of Turkey's largest lenders – is accused of being involved in a gold-for-oil scheme and transferring \$20 billion of restricted Iranian

funds through the intermediaries of several senior ministers in the ruling Justice and Development Party.

A court in New York, which last year rejected the bank's appeal for the case to be dropped, is set to begin hearings about the case on Feb. 25.

Halkbank may also be restricted from acceding to the US financial system and dollar transactions if found guilty of violating sanctions.

The case has been contentious due to the tense relationship between Ankara and Washington.

The bank's senior executive, Hakan Atilla, was sentenced to 32 months in jail two years ago.

In October 2019, Atilla, former jailed banker and former executive of the bank, was selected to become the CEO of the Istanbul stock exchange.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the second-biggest shareholder, sold its 10 percent stake in the stock exchange allegedly because of Atilla's selection.

He was sentenced to prison in the US for helping Iran in evade sanctions in a multibillion-dollar scheme. He was then released and returned to Turkey in July 2019 after serving 28 months behind bars.

## **FASTFACT**

**A court in New York, which last year rejected the bank's appeal for the case to be dropped, is set to begin hearings about the case on Feb. 25.**

His appointment came a week after US prosecutors in New York filed fraud and money laundering charges against Halkbank.

Ibrahim Kahveci, a Turkish economist, said the Halkbank case became political because it was used as a stick by Washington during a period of difficult relations.

"If Halkbank faces huge penalties, then the bank can cancel all its SWIFT operations. Foreign investors would avoid the bank and Turkey-based operators would not conduct operations through it. It would lead to short-term fluctuations in the economy," he told Arab News.

Timothy Ash, an analyst at BlueBay Asset Management, told Arab News that the "US reaction seems to reflect the personal relationship between US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For some reason there is a 'connection' between the two leaders and Trump keeps blocking any sanctions on Turkey."

He added: "Perhaps this case might be a little different in that the fine will be levied by the Southern District of New York (SDNY), which might be beyond the control of Trump."



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Hundreds of employees fired from Turkey's Incirlik air base  
Turkey's Erdogan takes on former ally with foundation takeover

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## [Protesters reject confidence vote on new Lebanon government](#)

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Sat, 2020-01-25 22:18

BEIRUT: Protesters in Beirut on Saturday carried banners expressing their objections to the granting on Jan. 21 of a confidence vote on the government of Hassan Diab.

They consider the new government an extension of previous ones accused of corruption. Streets leading to the Parliament were blocked by high concrete walls to ward off any attempt to break through the security cordon around the building.

Parliament is expected to hold legislative sessions over two days from Monday

to discuss the 2020 budget that was prepared by the former government of Saad Hariri before it resigned on Oct. 29 under pressure from peaceful demonstrations.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said Parliament cannot discuss any task before voting on the 2020 budget plan. This means the confidence vote cannot be held before the budget is endorsed.

Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati said the new government has to “work on a new draft budget that includes reform plans, with a timeline to implement them.”

Activist Mohammed Kassem told Arab News: “All signs indicate that Diab’s government will head to Parliament to endorse the previous government’s budget that’s full of flaws, especially with regards to the reform pledge.” He said: “Protesters will step up their actions on the streets until they get a rescue plan, end banks’ policies and their restrictions on people’s deposits, end the Central Bank’s financial policies, and achieve the independence of the judiciary so judges will be able to handle cases with full transparency, especially ones related to recovering embezzled public assets.”

He added: “Activists are trying to forbid political parties from riding the wave of the revolution, and are trying to limit rioting, which has characterized many protests.”

Kassem called on the authorities to protect protesters rather than attack them. He said protesters will remain on the streets to change Lebanon from a “country of banks and money exchange to a productive country.”

There has been leaked information that the government will propose a five-month contingency plan to reform the judiciary; fight illicit enrichment, corruption and economic crime; and modernize public institutions.







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## [Hundreds of employees fired from Turkey's Incirlik air base](#)

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ANKARA: More than 420 people working at a crucial military air base in southern Turkey have lost their jobs, with some analysts considering it symbolic of decreased cooperation levels with the US and as the Pentagon reconsiders Middle East deployments.

Incirlik Air Base is located in Turkey's Adana province, near the Syrian border, and it has been a strategic element in ties between Ankara and Washington. It has also played a key role for the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) against Daesh in Syria and Iraq in the past, as well as hosting US nuclear warheads.

The Colorado-based company Vectrus System Corporation, which provides day-to-day maintenance and operation services at the base, terminated the contracts of almost half of its employees at the base earlier this month.

"The base surged to support OIR," Aaron Stein, director of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, told Arab News. "The Turkey-based staff for OIR has mostly left. So, the base is going back to its pre-OIR level of people, and that level requires less contractor support." Vectrus did not reply to Arab News' request for comment about its decision to scale back at the base.

Joe Macaron, a resident fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, said the move was largely symbolic as the canceled contracts related to logistical support rather than the US military mission.

"But obviously, it comes against the background of some tensions in the US-Turkish relationship and previous hints by Ankara that it might reconsider the status of the Incirlik base," he told Arab News. "The Pentagon is reconsidering its deployment across the Middle East and it might be looking to become less dependent on Incirlik without fully exiting this crucial military air base."

Incirlik air base has been used in the past as a bargaining chip at times of tension between the two countries.

"Turkey may re-evaluate the status of the Incirlik Air Base if the US imposes sanctions," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said last month in an interview with pro-government channel A-Haber, referring to the potential fallout from Turkey's decision to buy an air defense system from Russia.

Washington has threatened to use its Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act to punish Ankara for buying the S-400 system.

Seth J. Frantzman, who is executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, said reports of the US reducing presence at Incirlik, or challenges to the US presence there, have been growing over the last years.

"Whether these reports relate to changes or are just random is unclear and it is important to note that the large interests of the military and history tend to mean the US does not simply walk away from bases, even if it reduces its role slowly over time," he told Arab News.

The US has invested heavily in the Jordanian Muwaffaq Salti Air Base to expand its presence there.



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