

More than 205 Palestinians wounded in Jerusalem al-Aqsa clashes

Confrontations at holy site leave 17 Israeli police officers wounded, with international calls for calm

Oliver Holmes in Jerusalem

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More than 205 Palestinians and 17 Israeli police officers were wounded during a night of intense clashes at a sacred Jerusalem site that holds the Dome of the Rock, medics and police said, a serious escalation in a weeks-long rise in violence.

Tensions in Jerusalem have soared recently, with Palestinians complaining of oppressive restrictions during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. An upcoming Israeli court ruling on whether authorities can evict dozens of Palestinians – and give their homes to Jewish settlers – has further inflamed the situation.

Tens of thousands of worshippers had gathered on Friday for weekly prayers at the hilltop al-Aqsa mosque compound amid a heavy Israeli police presence. After nightfall, Palestinian men threw chairs, shoes and rocks at officers in riot gear, who fired grenades and rubber-coated bullets at the crowds.

An al-Aqsa official appealed for calm through the mosque's loudspeakers. "Police must immediately stop firing stun grenades at worshippers, and the youth must calm down and be quiet."

By the end of the night, the Palestine Red Crescent reported 88 people were hospitalised, many with wounds to their eyes and face from rubber bullets and grenade fragments. Smaller clashes broke out in other parts of Jerusalem.

Israeli police said at least 17 officers were wounded, half of them hospitalised, and a spokesperson promised to "respond with a heavy hand to all violent disturbances".

Washington called for calm and said it was "deeply concerned", while the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, called on the UN security council to hold an urgent session. Iran, Israel's arch-enemy, described the clashes as an "attack on al-Aqsa mosque".

It was not clear what started the violence, which was especially intense. However, it was widely expected after near-nightly confrontations in the holy city and a series of killings in the occupied West Bank.

Last month, far-right Israeli groups and the Israeli police faced off with Palestinians, leading to dozens of injuries. At the time, militants in Gaza fired rockets into Israel.

Meanwhile, the past week has seen a series of killings in the West Bank. On Sunday, a drive-by shooting, later attributed by Israeli authorities to a Palestinian attacker, killed a 19-year-old Israeli. And late on Wednesday, Israeli troops killed a 16-year-old

Palestinian near the city of Nablus in an incident that is being investigated. On Friday, police said troops had shot and killed two Palestinians after the men opened fire on a base in the occupied West Bank.

This week, a leading Israeli rights group, B'Tselem, reported several attacks by Israeli settlers on Palestinians, including setting fire to fields near the village of Burin, south of Nablus.

Jerusalem has always been the centre of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, with its holy sites revered by Jews and Muslims. The Old City's Western Wall forms part of the holiest site in Judaism – the Temple Mount. It is equally part of the al-Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary, however, with the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque above it. A period of intense Israeli-Palestinian violence, known as the second intifada, began in 2000 when the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon made a provocative visit to the site.

Further violence is predicted over the coming days. Sunday night is Laylat al-Qadr or the Night of Destiny, the most sacred during Ramadan. It also marks the start of Jerusalem Day, a national holiday in which hardline Israeli nationalists hold parades.

On Monday, Israel's supreme court will decide whether to grant an appeal to Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah who face losing their homes. Jewish families claim they were lost during a war that accompanied Israel's creation in 1948, a conflict in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced.

Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordanian forces in a 1967 war and later annexed it. Under Israeli law, Jews who can prove pre-1948 title can claim back their Jerusalem properties. No similar law exists for Palestinians. The US and the EU have condemned the evictions.

Rupert Colville, the spokesperson for the UN high commissioner for human rights, demanded on Friday that Israel halt actions that "leads to a risk of forcible transfer", which he said, "may amount to war crimes".