Israel warns against religious war on Temple Mount

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Israel accused the Palestinian Authority of inciting a religious war on the Temple Mount after a Palestinian Molotov cocktail attack on an Israeli police station on the holy site sparked an afternoon riot.

Police closed the al-Aqsa compound for the remainder of the day but are expected to fully reopen it Wednesday.

“Abu Mazen [PA President Mahmoud Abbas] continued to lie and incite violence together with the terror organizations of Murabitoun and Hamas, in an attempt to ignite a fire and cause a religious war on the Temple Mount,” Public Safety Minister Gilad Erdan said.

“We will not allow this to happen,” Erdan said. “We will continue to act to restore calm on the [Temple Mount]. Police will respond with strength and determination to any act of violence or attempt to harm Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount.”

Tuesday’s incidents began at about 1 p.m., when Palestinians threw a Molotov cocktail at the police post, which then caused a fire and damaged the building. One police officer was lightly injured from smoke inhalation.

Police so far have arrested two minors, suspected of involvement in the incident. They will be brought to court on Wednesday.

Some Palestinians, however, rejected the police account that the post was torched by a firebomb. At least two eyewitnesses claimed that the fire was caused by children who were playing with fireworks.

Dozens of policemen rushed to the Temple Mount following the attack, sparking scuffles with Palestinian women and Wakf guards. Three Palestinians were immediately arrested in connection with the firebomb attack on the police post.

The police closed the entrances to the compound after Palestinian activists and groups began calling on Palestinians to head to al-Aqsa Mosque to “defend it against the assault by the police and Jewish extremists.”

The police also temporarily closed the Old City’s Damascus Gate and Lions’ Gate. Hamas called on Palestinians to head to the Temple Mount to “break the closure.”

United Nations Special Coordinator to the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov called for Israelis and Palestinians to show restraint.

“Places of worship are for prayer, not for provocations and violence. Restraint must be shown to avoid inflaming an already tense situation. The status quo must be fully respected by all,” he tweeted.

The Palestinian Authority called for international intervention to “halt Israeli assaults on al-Aqsa Mosque” and warned that Israel’s actions would have “grave repercussions.” Abbas was in contact with relevant parties, specifically Jordan, to pressure Israel to “stop this dangerous escalation,” said a statement issued by Abbas’s office in Ramallah.

PA government spokesman Yusef al-Mahmoud accused Israel of seeking “to carry out its schemes to control al-Aqsa Mosque and obliterate the Arab features of Jerusalem.”

PLO Executive Committee member Ahmed Majdalani urged Arab and Islamic states to take quick measures “to stop Israel from igniting fires in Jerusalem, the capital of the State of Palestine.”

He and other senior Palestinian officials also claimed that Israel was working toward dividing the Temple Mount compound between Jews and Muslims.

“Al-Aqsa Mosque is a redline,” cautioned Osama Qawassmeh, a spokesman for Abbas’s ruling Fatah faction in the West Bank. “Tampering with holy sites, especially al-Aqsa Mosque, is a direct call for violence. Fatah won’t allow Israel to carry out its schemes, regardless of the price.”

Tuesday’s tensions came as Israel and Jordan, which controls the Wakf Department in east Jerusalem, continued to search for ways to solve the crisis surrounding the Bab a-Rahma (Golden Gate) site on the Temple Mount. It is a situation that has also threatened to cause a violent outbreak on the Temple Mount, known to Palestinians as Al-Haram Al-Sharif.

Israel has accused the Wakf of attempting to open a new mosque on the Temple Mount, by transforming a building that had been used as office space into a place of worship.

“An additional mosque will not be built on the Temple Mount,” Erdan said. “We will do everything necessary to maintain the status quo.”

Police Interim Commissioner Motti Cohen visited the Temple Mount in the afternoon to receive a briefing from Jerusalem district commander Maj.-Gen. Doron Yedid.

This was not the first attack of its kind against the police post, which Palestinians see as a symbol of Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount. In 1990, Palestinian rioters tried to attack a number of policemen who had barricaded themselves inside the post. The policemen managed to flee the scene and the rioters torched the post and damaged police equipment.

In 2014, Palestinian rioters again torched the post after policemen who were stationed there were ordered by their commanders to leave out of fear for their lives.

But the overall focus is on the Golden Gate crisis, which erupted when the Wakf unilaterally reopened the contested site last month. The site had closed by court order 16 years ago because of illegal construction and activity carried out there by the Islamic Movement in Israel and Hams-affiliated activists.

The Jerusalem Magistrate’s Court, at the request of the police, said it would issue an order to allow police to once again close the Bab a-Rahma building unless the Wakf submitted a response to the court by last Sunday. Wakf officials have rejected the court order, saying they do not recognize its jurisdiction over Islamic holy shrines and did not submit a response.

On Tuesday, the court extended its one-week closure deadline to the Wakf so as to allow Jordan and Israel more time to find a solution to the crisis.

KAN News reported that one possible compromise in the works would allow the building to remain open with a pledge from the Wakf that it would not be turned into a mosque. The Wakf would be to give time to renovate the building as office space.

Jordan’s King Abdullah II has been in Washington this week meeting with US politicians about ties between the two countries and regional stability, including the Temple Mount.

On Tuesday he spoke with the US Senate Armed Services Committee, Senate leadership, the Senate Committee on Appropriations and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Separately in the West Bank city of Hebron, the IDF said soldiers shot and killed a Palestinian man who had run with a knife toward a Jewish residential building with a knife. No soldiers were injured.

The Palestinian higher judicial council said the 40-year-old man had worked in a Palestinian court in Hebron. It denounced the shooting as “a despicable crime.”

The PA Ministry of Health said that in the West Bank city of Salfit a 23-year-old Palestinian was shot dead during clashes that broke out between the IDF and city residents.

An IDF spokeswoman said soldiers had used riot-dispersal means, mainly tear gas, against dozens of Palestinians who threw stones at them and that the military did not know of any live fire being used. She provided no further details.