

Israel releases top Muslim cleric in Holy Land (A-Arabiyah)

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Palestinian mufti Muhammad Hussein was released without being charged. (AFP)
The Associated Press, Jerusalem -

Israeli police detained the top Muslim cleric in the Holy Land Wednesday in a rare crackdown on a leading religious figure, questioning him for several hours before releasing him without charge.

The detention, which followed recent unrest at a disputed holy site in Jerusalem, drew harsh condemnation from Palestinian leaders and neighboring Jordan and threatened to complicate U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's latest effort to restart Mideast peace talks.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said the mufti of Jerusalem, Mohammed Hussein, was questioned for six hours in connection to "recent disturbances" on a hilltop compound in Jerusalem's Old City revered by Jews and Muslims. This included "incitement, disturbances and public disorder."

Hussein was released without being charged, Rosenfeld said. He did not elaborate, but another Israeli official said the Muslim cleric was issued a warning and told to lower tensions a day after Muslim worshippers threw rocks and chairs at tourists visiting the hilltop compound that houses the Al Aqsa Mosque.

The Israeli official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with the media. Hussein, who was appointed mufti in 2006, could not be reached for comment.

The compound is one of the region's most sensitive sites. It is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, built above the ruins of the two biblical Jewish Temples. Muslims call it the Haram as-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary. It is home to the Al Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam, from which Muslims believe their Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. The iconic gold-topped Dome of the Rock sits next to the mosque.

The conflicting claims to the site lie at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and any acts seen as upsetting the delicate status quo risk setting off violence. Palestinians see visits by Israelis at the site as a provocation. Israeli steps to quell Palestinian disturbances there have led to riots in the past.

The mufti of Jerusalem is the top cleric in charge of Jerusalem's Islamic holy places, including the Al Aqsa compound. Hussein's predecessor, Ekrima Sabri, was detained for several hours in 2002, at the height of the Palestinian uprising against Israel, on suspicion of incitement for suicide attacks.

Hussein has been known as a relative moderate, with close ties to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. While Jordan, which controlled east Jerusalem before Israel captured it in 1967, remains the custodial authority over the Al Aqsa compound, the Palestinians appoint the mufti.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who appointed Hussein, condemned his detention. "Arresting the mufti is a stark challenge to the freedom of worship," Abbas said in a statement released by the official Palestinian news agency Wafa.

The Jordanian parliament also denounced the detention and in a symbolic gesture, voted that the Israeli ambassador to the kingdom be expelled. Although Wednesday's vote in the 150-seat chamber in Amman was not binding, it underlined frustration in the kingdom over Israeli policies toward the Palestinians.

Jordanian legislators also demanded that the kingdom's envoy be recalled from Tel Aviv and started drafting a recommendation that the government annul the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty. Jordan's Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour later said he would formally protest the Israeli action.

The detention was a blow to Kerry's efforts to restart peace talks, which have been stalled since late 2008. The Palestinians have refused to negotiate while Israel builds settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. The Palestinians claim both areas, captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war, as parts of a future independent state and say settlement construction must halt.

Kerry has been shuttling between the Israeli and Palestinian sides in recent weeks in hopes of finding a formula to restart talks. In Rome, he was meeting the chief Israeli negotiator, Tzipi Livni.

The incident occurred as Israelis marked "Jerusalem Day," which commemorates the anniversary of Israel's capture of east Jerusalem. The city's eastern sector is home to the Old City, where key Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy sites are located.

Many Jews celebrate the day for "reunifying" the city they yearned and prayed for. Thousands flock to the city to wave flags and dance outside the Old City.

For Palestinians it's a somber day