



By: TA | AP Insight

Israeli minister prays at flashpoint holy site, raising fears of escalating tensions



Itamar Ben-Gvir's move followed the release of videos showing two tortured Israeli hostages in Gaza, provoking Palestinians and Arab neighbors. Could this gesture lead to a new escalation while Israel is under pressure to end the humanitarian crisis in Gaza?

A far-right Israeli **minister** visited and prayed at Jerusalem's most sensitive holy site on Sunday, triggering regional condemnation and fears that the provocative move could further escalate tensions.

The visit came as hospitals in Gaza said 27 more Palestinians seeking food aid were killed by Israeli fire.

With Israel facing global criticism over famine-like **conditions** in the besieged strip, the visit by Itamar Ben-Gvir to the hillside compound threatened to further set back efforts by international **mediators** to halt Israel's nearly two-year military offensive in the Gaza Strip.

The area, which Jews call the Temple Mount, is the holiest site in Judaism and was home to the ancient biblical temples. Muslims call the site the Noble Sanctuary. Today it is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam.

Visits by Israeli officials are considered a provocation across the Muslim world and openly praying violates a longstanding status quo at the site.

Jews have been allowed to tour the site but are barred from praying, with Israeli police and troops providing security. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said after Ben-Gvir's visit that Israel would not change the norms governing the holy site.

Ben-Gvir made the visit following Hamas' release of videos showing two emaciated Israeli hostages.

The videos caused in uproar in Israel and raised pressure on the government to reach a deal to bring home from Gaza the **remaining** 50 hostages who were captured on Oct. 7, 2023, in the Hamas-led attack that triggered

the war.

During his visit to the compound, Ben-Gvir called for Israel to annex the Gaza Strip and encourage Palestinians to leave, reviving rhetoric that has complicated negotiations to end the war.

He raged against a video that Hamas released Saturday of 24-year-old hostage Eyyar David showing him skeletal and hollow-eyed in a dimly lit Gaza tunnel. He called it an attempt to pressure Israel.

Ben-Gvir's previous visits to the site have prompted threats from Palestinian militant groups. Clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian demonstrators in and around the site fueled an 11-day war with Hamas in 2021.

His visit Sunday was swiftly condemned as an incitement by Palestinian leaders as well as Jordan, the Al-Aqsa Mosque's custodian, and Saudi Arabia.

Sufian Qudah, spokesman for neighboring Jordan's foreign ministry, condemned what he called "provocative incursions by the extremist minister" and implored Israel to prevent escalation.

Videos of hungry and suffering Israeli hostages

Israel has been jolted by new videos of hostages with their ribs protruding and bodies ravaged by hunger. Netanyahu's office said it spoke with the Red Cross to seek help in providing them food and medical care.

The videos — released by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the second-largest militant group in Gaza — triggered outrage across the political spectrum.

Tens of thousands rallied in Tel Aviv on Saturday urging Israel and the United States to urgently pursue their release after suspending ceasefire talks.

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Right-wing politicians who oppose deals with Hamas said the footage reinforced their conviction that the militant group must be obliterated.

“From here we need to bring a message and ensure that from today, we conquer all of the Gaza Strip, declare sovereignty over all of the Gaza Strip, take out every Hamas member and encourage voluntary emigration,” Ben-Gvir said on a video posted on social media after his visit to the holy site.

Deadly chaos grips food distribution points

Palestinians reported more deadly violence at aid sites Sunday, and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society said a staff member was killed when Israeli forces shelled its office with artillery.

Hospital officials **said** Israeli forces killed at least 27 Palestinians seeking food, and witnesses described facing gunfire as hungry crowds surged toward aid sites.

Desperation has gripped the Palestinian territory of more than 2 million, which experts warn **faces** “a worst-case scenario of famine” because of Israel’s blockade. No aid entered Gaza between March 2 and May 19, and aid has been limited since then.

Yousef Abed, among the people en route to a distribution point, described coming under indiscriminate fire and seeing at least three people bleeding on the ground. “I couldn’t stop and help them because of the bullets,” he said.

The United Nations says 859 people were killed near GHF sites from May 27 to July 31

Two hospitals in southern and central Gaza reported receiving bodies from routes leading to the Israeli-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation aid sites, including 11 killed in the Teina area while trying to reach a distribution point in Khan Younis.

Three Palestinian eyewitnesses, including one traveling through Teina, told The Associated Press that shootings occurred on the routes, which are in military zones secured by Israeli forces. They said they saw soldiers open fire on hungry crowds advancing toward troops.

Eyewitnesses seeking food have reported similar gunfire in recent weeks near aid distribution sites. The United Nations says 859 people were killed near GHF sites from May 27 to July 31 and hundreds of others have been killed along the routes of U.N.-led food convoys.

GHF says its armed contractors have only used pepper spray or fired warning shots to prevent deadly crowding. Israel’s military has said it only fires warning shots. Both claim the death tolls have been exaggerated.

Israel’s military did not immediately respond to questions about Sunday’s reported fatalities but said it was reviewing the Red Crescent’s claim. GHF’s media office said there was no gunfire “near or at our sites.”

More deaths from hunger

Meanwhile, Gaza’s Health Ministry said six more Palestinian adults died of malnutrition-related causes over the past 24 hours, bringing the malnutrition-related death toll among adults to 82 over the five weeks that the ministry has counted such deaths. Malnutrition-related deaths are not included in the ministry’s count of war casualties.



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Ninety-three children have also died of malnutrition-related causes since the war began, the ministry said.

Israel has taken steps in the past week to increase the flow of food into Gaza, saying 1,200 aid trucks have entered while hundreds of pallets have been airdropped, but U.N. and relief groups say conditions have not improved. The U.N. has said 500 to 600 trucks a day are needed.

Anger has led to protests overseas, including one in Australia on Sunday by thousands of people.

The 2023 attack that sparked the war killed about 1,200 people and abducted another 251. Israel's retaliatory military offensive has killed more than 60,800 Palestinians, **according** to Gaza's Health Ministry.

The ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count, is staffed by medical professionals. The United Nations and other independent experts view its figures as the most reliable count of casualties. Israel has disputed its figures but hasn't provided its own account of casualties.