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MIDDLE EAST

Israel Removes Remaining Security Measures at Jerusalem Holy Site

Installation at the site had sparked widespread protest among Palestinians and across Arab world



Palestinian women pray as others shout slogans outside the compound known to Muslims as Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as Temple Mount, in Jerusalem's Old City. PHOTO: AMIR COHEN/REUTERS

By Rory Jones

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JERUSALEM—Israel on Thursday removed the remaining security measures at the entrance to one of Jerusalem’s holiest sites, in a move that appeared aimed at ending a standoff that has piled political pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Muslim leaders called off a boycott imposed in protest of the measures and encouraged Palestinians to return to pray at the site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary. Clashes broke out between Palestinians and Israeli security personnel at the compound later Thursday as thousands of Palestinians came to pray.

The metal detectors and metal archways supporting cameras and railings at the site had been installed after Arab gunmen killed two Israeli policemen there on July 14. The security measures sparked widespread protests among Arabs who said Israel was using the measures to try to control access to the site.

Violent protests and attacks over the weekend left three Israelis and at least three Palestinians dead.

The episode has weakened Mr. Netanyahu, who already faces growing unpopularity at home over corruption allegations. Some 77% of Israelis believe the government capitulated to Palestinian demands by removing the metal detectors, according to a Tuesday poll by the country’s Channel 2 broadcaster.

Israel Hayom, a daily owned by U.S. billionaire Sheldon Adelson and once considered supportive of Mr. Netanyahu, published a scathing editorial on its front page this week over the prime minister’s handling of the crisis, calling the government response “feeble and frightened.”

“Israel will come out weakened,” Naftali Bennett, who is a member of Mr. Netanyahu’s governing coalition and secretary of education, as well as leader of the far-right Jewish Home party, told Army Radio on Thursday.

Police are investigating Mr. Netanyahu in twin corruption probes into whether he received unlawful gifts in office and tried to negotiate favorable coverage in another newspaper. Mr. Netanyahu denies the allegations, but the probes have damaged his



An aerial view of the compound known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as the Temple Mount. PHOTO: REUTERS

Unrest at Temple Mount

July 14, 2017

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Arab gunman kill two Israeli policeman at the Jerusalem holy site known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary. The plaza is closed to all visitors.

The Israeli cabinet decides to put metal detectors at the entrance to the plaza to increase security.

Israel reopens the plaza with metal detectors. Waqf, the religious body that administers the site with Jordan, refuses to accept the security measures. It tells worshipers to pray outside.

The Israeli government convenes to discuss the metal detectors but decides to keep them.

Palestinians urge worshipers to visit Jerusalem and attend prayers outside of the plaza in protest. Clashes break out between Palestinians and Israeli security forces, leaving three Palestinians dead. Later, a 19-year-old Palestinian stabs and kills three Israelis in a West Bank settlement.

An Israeli security guard at the country's embassy in Jordan is stabbed. He shoots dead the Jordanian assailant and a bystander. The guard and Israeli diplomats later return to Israel.

Israel removes the metal detectors. Palestinians call on Israel to remove all remnants of security, including metal archways and railings.

Israel removes all remaining security measures, leading Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to face criticism for what Israelis see as capitulation to Palestinian demands. Waqf and Palestinians return to pray at the site.

standing among Israelis.

"All these things are adding up," said Emmanuel Navon, a political analyst and lecturer at Tel Aviv University. "He comes across as a leader that's made the wrong decisions."

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Even so, he will likely weather this latest crisis, according to Mitchell Barak, political analyst at Jerusalem-based Keevoon Global Research.

"Netanyahu walks away from this unscathed," he said. "For one reason: Israelis cannot identify an alternative to Netanyahu."

A spokesman for the prime minister declined to comment on the criticism.

Mr. Netanyahu is expected to back a bill from members of his government to absorb settlements around Jerusalem in the West Bank into the city's municipal boundaries, adding thousands more Jewish settler residents, Israeli media said. The move is likely to appeal to Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing political base.

Members of Mr. Netanyahu's Likud Party have lobbied for the government to officially annex the settlements and absorb them into Israeli territory, a move that the prime minister has so far not supported amid signals from the White House to curb settlement expansion.

The latest proposal would absorb the settlers into the Jerusalem municipality but not Israeli territory, Israeli media said. Its time frame for implementation is unclear.

Mr. Netanyahu also called on Thursday for the death penalty for a 19-year-old Palestinian who killed three Israeli settlers at their home last weekend in response to the Israeli security measures at the holy site in Jerusalem, echoing similar calls by right-wing lawmakers. Israel hasn't used the death penalty since it hanged Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann in 1962.

Palestinians were initially jubilant over what they consider a symbolic victory over Mr. Netanyahu and his government over the removal of the security measures. Thousands of Palestinians visited the site on Thursday afternoon, giving out free food and water to fellow worshipers and shouting "Allahu Akbar," Arabic for God is great.

"They now know the force of the people of Jerusalem," Farah Walid, 71, said of the Israeli government as he entered the compound to pray at the Al Aqsa mosque.

The metal detectors were removed on Tuesday and the archways on Thursday. The government has said it would install sophisticated technology in the coming months to detect weapons, but hasn't said how the equipment would work. It also said it would increase police presence around the site.

While Jews can visit the site, only Muslims are allowed to pray on the holy plaza. Jewish groups have lobbied for that right.

Israel has maintained that the new measures are purely for security, and has denied it is attempting to change the current rules.

The Waqf, the Jordanian religious body that is custodian of the site and had called for Muslims to boycott and pray outside, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas both encouraged Palestinians to return.

Mr. Abbas had called for the cutting of ties with Israel until full access was returned. He didn't immediately restore those ties on Thursday but his office said he was closely following developments.

Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, praised the Palestinian protesters.

"We salute the steadfastness of the people of Jerusalem," Ismail Haniyeh, the Islamist movement's leader, told reporters in Gaza.

— *Nuha Musleh in Ramallah and Abu Bakr Bashir in Gaza City contributed to this article.*

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