

Egypt Grand Mufti Warns Against Judaization of al-Quds

CAIRO (Press TV) – Egypt's Grand Mufti Shawki Allam has warned against the Zionist regime's plans to Judaize the occupied al-Quds and obliterate its true identity, after the occupying regime's authorities banned the raising of the Muslim call to prayer at the Ibrahim Mosque under the pretext that settlers were celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim.

Allam, in a statement released on Friday, denounced the repeated incursions of Zionist settlers into Palestinian mosques, particularly al-Aqsa Mosque, under the protection of Zionist troops, and their performance of Talmudic rituals inside the sacred site.

He also slammed the occupying regime officials' recent repressive measures in the occupied city of al-Quds, stressing the need for implementation of the principles of the international law to stop settlers from holding rites in Palestin-



Zionist troops in front of the Dome of the Rock in the Old city of al-Quds

ian religious sites.

He stressed that the excavation work under al-Aqsa Mosque and its surroundings as well as in the Old City of occupied al-Quds represent a serious threat to the mosque.

Separately, the Palestinian Min-

istry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates said the ban was "a call for religious war."

It went on to urge the international community and relevant UN organizations and councils to assume their legal and moral responsibilities in protecting holy sites.

The Director and head of the Ibrahim Mosque, Sheikh Hefzi Abu Sneina, said the ban came into effect on Thursday and will remain in place until Saturday evening.

He added that these measures are an infringement on the freedom of worship guaranteed by international law.

The al-Aqsa Mosque compound sits just above the Western Wall plaza and houses both the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

According to an agreement signed between the Zionist regime and the Jordanian government after the regime's occupation of East al-Quds in 1967, non-Muslim worship at the compound is prohibited.

Palestinians want the occupied West Bank as part of their future independent state with East Jerusalem al-Quds as the capital of their future sovereign state.

Iran... (Continued From Page One)

He also gave assurances that the Iraqi government will not allow the recent incidents in Iraq to affect "very good" relations between the two neighbors.

Hussein was in Iran "to discuss regional developments, including ways to balance relations and avoid tension and escalation" with Iranian officials, according to an Iraqi foreign ministry statement.

An Iraqi official close to Iran said the strikes killed one fighter and wounded four. U.S. officials said they were limited in scope to show President Joe Biden's administration will avoid a big regional escalation.

Shamkhani said "we will confront the U.S. plan to revive terrorism in the region".

The airstrikes targeted sites on the Syrian side of the Iraqi-Syrian frontier, where anti-terror groups control an important crossing for weapons, personnel and goods.

Iraqi resistance groups on Friday denounced the U.S. airstrikes, calling for an investigation into the assaults.

Qais Khazali, leader of Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq movement, a subdivision of anti-terror Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or Hashd al-Sha'abi, said the deliberate continuation of the U.S. attacks is in line with the Zionist regime's interests and to the detriment of the Iraqis.

"We condemn the targeting of the headquarters of Hashd al-Sha'abi, which is performing its task of protecting Iraq's borders with Syria. This vile act shows the hostile policies of the new US government," Khazali underlined.

"We emphasize that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq is the only way to achieve stability in the country. The people's will, political decisions and the strength of the Iraqi resistance are sufficient to realize that goal."

Hadi al-Amiri, head of Fatah (Conquest) Alliance at the Iraqi parliament called on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to launch an investigation into the deadly U.S. strike as well as the alleged intelligence cooperation between the Iraqi government and the Pentagon.

"Our intelligence indicates that, contrary to Washington's claims, Hashd al-Sha'abi and not the Iraqi Islamic Resistance in Syria was the target of the attack," al-Amiri said.

Iraqi lawmaker and Fatah spokesman Ahmed al-Asadi said the U.S. act of aggression killed and injured 30 people.

"The repetition of the U.S. bombing of Hashd al-Sha'abi positions and the barracks belonging to the Iraqi armed forces on the Syrian border is a clear violation of sovereignty and condemned," he said, urging the Iraqi government, nation and political factions to unite against such attacks.

Iraq's Al-Nujaba movement warned that the new U.S. crime that targeted the PMU forces will not go unanswered.

Anti-U.S. sentiment has been running high in Iraq following Washington's assassination of top Iranian anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani and PMU deputy head Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis near Baghdad airport on January 3, 2020.

In a statement carried by Al-Sumaria television network, Iraq's Defense Ministry expressed surprise at the U.S. claims about intelligence cooperation with Baghdad prior to Friday's strike.

It said that Iraq's ties with the U.S.-led coalition forces are restricted to the fight against the Daesh terrorist group while preserving the country's independence and sovereignty.

The Iraqi Interior Ministry also rejected the U.S. claims, saying the cooperation with the coalition is only focused on boosting the capabilities of Iraqi security forces in policing works.

Biden... (Continued From Page One)

The administration of President Joe Biden, who as a presidential candidate in 2019 had called Saudi Arabia a "pariah," made the report public on Friday, documenting what experts had been saying for years - that the murder, which involved the crown prince's aides, could not have happened without his blessing.

"Aides were unlikely to question Muhammad bin Salman's orders or undertake sensitive actions without his consent," the report said.

Saudi Arabia was quick to reject the findings, calling the U.S. assessment "negative, false and unacceptable".

Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also stood behind Saudi Arabia's position.

While rights groups hailed the release of the report as a step towards ensuring accountability for the murder, the administration's failure to impose sanctions on the lead perpetrator left many disappointed.

"The Biden administration is trying to

thread the needle. They want to continue to work with a partner that has committed a heinous act against a U.S. resident, while taking some steps toward accountability," Seth Binder, advocacy officer at the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), told MEE.

"But if human rights is really going to be at the centre of U.S. foreign policy, as the administration has repeatedly stated, then it can't give murderers a free pass."

Before taking office, Biden vowed to "re-assess" U.S.-Saudi relations. Since his inauguration, he claims he has paused some arms sales to Riyadh and announced an end to Washington's support for the kingdom's "offensive operations" in Yemen, but time has to pass to verify the claim.

Many rights advocates and lawmakers are demanding a more forceful approach to Riyadh and MBS from Washington.

"We're calling on the Biden administration to move ahead with accountability measures to sanction MBS personally, along with everyone else who is implicated in that killing," said Raed Jarrar, advocacy director at Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN).

Philippe Nassif, advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International USA, said many rights advocates are "disappointed" in Washington's decision against sanctioning MBS.

He added that Congress and the Biden administration should halt offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia, not only over the murder of Khashoggi but also for the mistreatment of dissidents at home and war crimes in Yemen.

"That warrants at the very least congressional action and a decision by the Biden administration to hit Saudi Arabia hard by banning these offensive sales because this is something that will send a very clear message to the international community that they also should do the same thing," Nassif told MEE.

"And this goes for France. And this goes for Britain, and goes for a whole host of European countries that also sell weapons to Saudi Arabia."

Leading Congress members from Biden's own Democratic Party said on Friday that the president should impose sanctions on MBS.

Congresswoman Ilhan Omar announced on Friday that she will be introducing a bill to penalize the crown prince. She called the release of the report a "turning point" in U.S.-Saudi relations.

"To this day, we continue to supply Saudi Arabia with U.S. arms that are used to commit human rights abuses around the world," the congresswoman said in a statement.

"To this day, we still cooperate with the Saudi regime on defensive war efforts - including intelligence sharing. These must end. And there must be direct consequences for Mohamed bin Salman and his functionaries."

Congressman Adam Schiff, chair of the House Intelligence Committee who has been pushing for making the report public, decried going after those who carried out the assassination, but not the leader who ordered it.

"I would like to see the administration go beyond what is announced in terms of repercussions to make sure there are repercussions directly to the crown prince."

Ron Wyden, a key Senate Democrat, also underscored the need to ensure that MBS is punished for the murder.

"There is still far more to do to ensure that the Saudi government follows international laws. There should be personal consequences for MBS - he should suffer sanctions, including financial, travel and legal - and the Saudi government should suffer grave consequences as long as he remains in the government."

Footage...

(Continued From Page 2)

"I am convinced as coordinator of the JCPOA that we do have diplomatic space, a diplomatic window of opportunity to dialogue," Borrell said.

The top EU diplomat added, "We need to use this opportunity and focus on solutions to bring the JCPOA back on track in order for everybody (to fulfill) their commitments."

Joe Biden, the current president of the United States, has repeatedly spoken of a willingness to rejoin the Iran deal, but in practice, he has so far been sticking with Trump's futile pressure campaign.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei said on February 17 that Iran will not accept mere verbal promises in the case of the nuclear agreement this time around and needs to see action on the part of the co-signatories, given the many instances of counterparty non-compliance the country has faced.

"Concerning the JCPOA, I should just say one word. We have heard many nice words and promises that have been violated and have not been fulfilled in action," Ayatollah Khamenei said. "But this time around, we accept only actions."

Palestinian Authority Says Seeks Warm Relations With Syria, Russia in 'New Middle East'

WEST BANK (Sputnik) – The Palestinian leadership is quietly reconsidering its place in the constellation of Middle Eastern geopolitics following a string of recent normalization deals between a number of Arab governments and the Zionist regime, with an eye toward further warming relations with Syria and Russia, according to a member of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

"After the recent deals between Israel and the Arab governments, we Palestinians will now adopt a strategy of more carefully balancing our relationships in the Middle East, where political dynamics are changing fast, and a new region is being born. We see it as important to continue building our relations with Russia, which is playing

a greater and more important role in this new Middle East. But also, we seek to continue stretching ties with President Bashar al-Assad who has now retaken most of his country from the militants, and who has always been a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause" the PA official who preferred to stay unnamed told Sputnik from his residence in the city of Ramallah.

The "deals" signed between Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates with the occupying regime of Israel in September 2020 were mediated by the Trump administration. The accords set the course for the normalization of relations between Tel Aviv and those two Arab states, and were the first of

their kind to have occurred since agreements struck with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. On the heels of the accords, the occupying regime and Sudan agreed to normalize bilateral relations in October 2020, followed by the regime and Morocco in December.

Palestinian Authority Spokesperson Nabil Abu Rudeineh called upon the Arab signatories to "immediately retract" what he described as the "despicable decision" and "betrayal" to sign peace treaties with the Zionist regime.

The senior PA official told Sputnik that siding with those regional actors who "have always stood with the Palestinian struggle," such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, will

become increasingly important.

He added that in order to work on strengthening relations with Syria, officials from the PA have taken a number of senior-levels trips to Damascus to meet with the Assad government in recent months and years.

"We have visited Syria many times in recent years. We met with, among others, the Syrian Foreign Minister to discuss the situation in both our countries, and how to respond to the United States' support for Israel's increased violations of Palestinian rights, including those under Trump's so-called Deal of the Century. On future visits, we are likely to discuss how the non-aligned Arabs can collectively respond to the Abraham Accords," the official explained.

Pro-Gov't Rallies Cause Outrage in Turkey

ANKARA (Arab News) – Large rallies for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and other "superspreaders" events have sparked public outcry, with the government accused of double standards in the country's fight against the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In recent weeks, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has attended these crowded events — some resembling pop concerts — along with other provincial congress meetings across the country.

The indoor events, with thousands in attendance, have been criticized over a lack of social distancing. Meanwhile, peaceful protests of university students and ordinary meetings of some dissident NGOs are still forbidden because they do not respect pandemic measures.

Restaurants, coffee houses and art excursions remain shut under pandemic restrictions, which has left thousands of laid-off workers on the verge of chronic poverty and merchants grappling with bankruptcy.

"Shopkeepers have closed shutters and they are utterly devastated. The AKP's rallies are wide open and everybody is smiling," Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the head of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, said

during his parliamentary speech on Tuesday.

The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party was fined for violating social distancing rules after one of its events, but no punishments have been imposed for the pro-government rallies.

Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca, who advises against large rallies, publicly apologized after Erdogan and a group of AKP officials gathered at a mosque in Istanbul on Feb. 21 for the funeral of a clergyman.

"I should have foreseen such a situation," Koca said Wednesday. "It is my mistake. As 83 million people, we should equally self-sacrifice ourselves by staying away from closed spaces and crowded areas during the pandemic."

Thousands of people forbidden from attending funerals, along with millions of children still unable to attend school, have taken to social media to express their anger and criticize the fairness of pandemic restrictions.

A video featuring AKP youth members from the southern Hatay branch dancing, singing and carrying each other on their shoulders all without masks has gone viral and was dubbed the "political corona party."

Kuwaiti Actor Dies Days After Receiving Pfizer-BioNTech Vaccination

KUWAIT CITY (Dispatches) – Kuwaiti actor Mishary al-Balam has died days after receiving the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccination, his family said.

Hassan al-Balam, a fellow actor who is a cousin of the late Mishary, confirmed the news night via his Instagram account.

Al-Balam contracted the coronavirus while receiving the first dose of a vaccine, according to the actor himself who shared the news of his infection on his Instagram account last Wednesday.

"Do not forget me from your prayers.

Praise be to God in any case. My family, fellow artists, and the loyal, beloved audience, thank you for asking. All that happened was I got infected during the vaccination. It's fate and forgive me for I cannot respond to the calls," al-Balam wrote on an Instagram post at the time.

The actor had shared a video on his Instagram account on February 11 as he received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, calling on his followers to also get vaccinated.

Al-Balam then quickly contracted the coronavirus and was moved days later to

the ICU unit at Sheikh Jaber Hospital in Kuwait after a drop in his oxygen levels.

Earlier this month, a report said that nearly 40 American recipients of Pfizer's and Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines in the United States had developed a rare immune disorder that attacks the blood. One patient died after receiving the vaccine.

The efficacy of Pfizer's and Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines have raised suspicions around the world, with many even in the U.S. remaining hesitant to get the vaccine.