

Korans burnt in West Bank mosque attack

By Douglas Hamilton, **BEIT FAJJAR, West Bank** | Mon 4 Oct 2010
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A partially burnt Koran is laid against the wall of a mosque that was vandalized in the West Bank village of Beit Fajar near Bethlehem 4 October 2010. Credit: Reuters/Ammar



(Reuters) - Jewish settlers opposed to a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians were accused of setting fire to a mosque in the West Bank on Monday, burning the Koran and scrawling threats in Hebrew on its walls.

"Mosques, we burn," said a warning scribbled at the door of the smoke-smudged mosque of Beit Fajar south of Bethlehem on the day Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appealed for cool heads to avert the collapse of U.S.-brokered peace talks.

The green-carpeted floor of the mosque was burned to a black crust in a dozen places where it was doused with kerosene and set alight at around three in the morning. A dozen copies of the Koran were scorched by the fire.

Palestinians said settlers were behind the attack.

"The settlers' message is: terrorize the Palestinian people," said Mohammad Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who came to inspect the damage and talk to the locals.

"Crimes like these do not terrorize the Palestinian people. On the contrary, such attacks will only embolden the Palestinian people and increase our determination to achieve all of our rights," he told Reuters after delivering a brief sermon.

Violence could complicate U.S.-led efforts to prevent the collapse of Middle East peace talks launched just a month ago. They were plunged into crisis last week when a 10-month Israeli moratorium on building new houses in West Bank Jewish settlements expired.

PRICE TAG

Beit Fajjar is a dusty, jumbled village of stone-cutting mills on a dead-end road outside the sprawling Jewish settlement of Gush Etzion, which is closed to Palestinians.

A Star of David symbol and the words "Price Tag" were found scrawled over the mosque's doorway. Militant settlers coined the slogan to warn of the cost of any threat to their presence.

It was the fourth such attack since December and "a very serious incident which we view with utmost gravity," said Israeli military spokeswoman Lieut. Colonel Avital Liebowitz.

Investigators from the Israeli police and the army, which has controlled the occupied West Bank since 1967, collected forensic evidence at the scene including footprints and a slice of the burned carpet, and took statements from witnesses.

On Saturday, the Palestinian leadership said the peace talks relaunched on September 2 but now in suspension could not resume until Israel halted settlement construction completely.

Netanyahu said on Monday there were "sensitive diplomatic contacts" with the United States to try to save the talks.

"I advise everybody to be patient, responsible, cool-headed and, above all, quiet," he said in remarks aimed at ministers in his right-wing coalition which is dominated by pro-settler parties, including his own Likud